

22 Pentecost, Proper 24, Yr. C

October 16, 2016

Genesis 32:22-31; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Today is one of those Sundays when the selected scriptures have an incredible number of themes upon which one could draw. One theme that runs through all the major readings is the idea of struggle: wrestling with God in the Genesis reading, wrestling with scripture in the letter to Timothy and, in Luke, either wrestling with injustice, which would be a surface reading of the text, or wrestling with the need to be persistent in prayer, which is a deeper meaning. Let's just stay with that for a minute and think about what it means to be persistent in prayer. What are we doing when we pray? Often our prayers tend to be about ourselves and our immediate needs. But perhaps prayer is meant to be much broader – maybe it's a stance that we take toward life and toward God, an attempt to wrestle with the BIG questions: who is God and who am I and how can I come to SEE God and so understand God's heart and mind and then line my own heart and mind up with that of God.

Keeping that in mind, look again at the reading from Genesis. Jacob, you'll remember, cheated Esau out of his birthright and out of their father's blessing and had to flee for his life. When we come in on this part of the story, Jacob is coming home after a 14-year absence. He's coming with his two wives and his eleven children and many possessions. He's got to be wondering about his reception. Does he think that maybe Esau has forgiven him? I don't think so – probably because he knows his own guilt and perhaps because he wouldn't have been forgiving had the situation been reversed. He's guilty and he knows it. So, when he gets word that Esau is coming with 400 men, he undoubtedly sees them all with swords in their hands. His guilt gives rise to fear. So he sends presents to Esau and then divides his camp and sends only some of them ahead, perhaps so that if one group is slaughtered, the other will survive. And then he spends the night alone and wrestles, the text tells us, with a "man" who he comes to understand was God. One way of thinking about this text is to think that Jacob, alone and awake, was forced to wrestle with his past conduct, with the truth about himself – only after he has done so is he fit to become Israel – the one who has striven with God. In the earlier evening, Jacob was a "successful" man, full of pride and arrogance. The next morning, he's a different fellow – he may now have a limp, but also he is now a person capable of admitting his sinfulness, capable of asking for, and receiving, Esau's forgiveness. Because when he meets his brother, Esau, rather than attacking him, welcomes him with hugs and kisses him and with that underserved reception, Jacob says to his brother, "I have come into your presence as into the presence of God." Because Jacob saw the face of God at Peniel, he now sees his life and everything else with completely different eyes. That's what prayer is about. It's the attempt to see God's face and understand God's ways. So in some sense we're praying whenever we are doing that: in study, in our relationship, in our work, in our decisions about how we spend our time, our money and even, in this season, in how we vote.

While it might not appear obvious, I'd like to suggest that the Timothy reading invites us to wrestle with scripture. It does so because of the verse about four lines in. Our translation reads: All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, etc., so that everyone who belongs to God may be equipped for every good work. That verse, especially the first part- "All

scripture is inspired by God” has been named by some commentators as the most dangerous verse in the Bible. That’s because, lifted out of context it’s been used to support biblical inerrancy and literalism. Inerrancy, you probably know, is simply the thought that the Bible, if it’s inspired by God, can’t be in error in any way. The key here is to understand the word “inspired.” Sometimes the word is translated as “breathed” – so all scripture is God breathed. As you know, some traditions hold that that means that God directly dictated every word of the scripture – taking the author’s hand, as it were, and guiding it along the page. That would be the view of many Muslims – that the Quran was dictated directly by God to Mohammed; it just needed to be written down. And that means that one is not supposed to even translate from the Arabic because that would interfere with the direct transmission. There’s no room here for interpretation, for growth, or for change. The same view of inspiration can be found in some Christian denominations. That’s the view of one end of the spectrum. On the other end is the view that the Bible is a nice book, it’s been around for a long time, but doesn’t really have anything to offer to contemporary society. But in the vast space between those views there is room for a view of inspiration that recognizes that this book is a record of a people’s encounter with the living God. But those who wrote it were human and they wrote it with their human understandings of what was going on. Which means that they were limited in what they understood – they understood what was going on and who God was through the limits of their minds, their times, their culture. If you read the Bible this way, you’ll see that there’s a trajectory – a movement – what I think we can call “progressive revelation” – as we mature, we understand more deeply. God doesn’t change but our understanding of God does. You’ll remember that Martin Luther King once said that the arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice? Well, the arc of the Bible narrative is long, too, but it bends toward love.

One other word about scripture. When I was studying this passage, I looked at one commentary that pointed out that our verse, the dangerous one, was ambiguous in the Greek. Instead of being translated as ALL SCRIPTURE IS INSPIRED BY GOD as useful, it could equally well be translated as EVERY SCRIPTURE THAT IS INSPIRED BY GOD is useful. You get the difference. Not that ALL is inspired, but that that scripture that IS inspired is useful. And perhaps, rather than get caught in the thicket of translations, it would make more sense to remember that the text is about what’s useful ...for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be...equipped for every good work. Ultimately, it’s about how you live and how you love that matters.

My OT and Hebrew professor liked to remind us of those days in the English church especially, when the Bible was chained to the pulpit. It was chained, he would say, because it’s a dangerous book. I’m guessing that it was chained mostly because it was COSTLY, but on another level, when you look at how the Bible has been used and misused, interpreted and misinterpreted, his comments were right on. We need to wrestle with the Bible, to study it, to come to it prayerfully, with open minds, not simply looking for something that will prove a point. As someone once said, if you find that you’re worshipping a God who loves only the people you love and conveniently hates all the people you hate, something’s wrong in your interpretation.

This past Wednesday evening, a number of us watched the movie, “The Butler” which, if you don’t know, is the story of a black man who served as butler to a number of presidents,

spanning the civil rights era. With that as a background I'd like to talk about how what I'm calling progressive revelation worked with regard to slavery. How understanding what the text said gradually changed with people's growth in experience and transformation.

Slavery was part of life in the ancient world and even in the NT, it was a social given. Nowhere in the Biblical text is there a condemnation of slavery. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the assumption was that God sanctioned it. In both the United States and Britain, this issue led to a heated debate about the nature of scripture and how it should be interpreted. Should it be the letter or the spirit of the Bible that controlled? Should it be the Biblical ideal and principle of love and non-partiality or ancient practices that controlled? Those who felt slavery was supported by the Bible had all the texts; those against it had the trajectory towards love that I mentioned earlier. Their argument was that certain texts of the Bible couldn't be used to justify actions that were contrary to the teachings of Jesus. John Wesley and George Whitfield and then William Wilberforce made those arguments in Britain and were ultimately successful in having the slave trade abolished. But the controversy raged on in the U.S. Peter Gomes, in his book about the Bible, goes so far as to say that the chief victim of the Civil War wasn't the South but the Bible because of this battle over how it should be read and where its authority lay. Those who trusted in it to prove the righteousness of the Southern case for slavery were defeated. Some were surprised that the Bible could be read so many different ways and that it could speak in contradictory and divisive terms. One clergyman wrote that losing the war hadn't changed his mind about the righteousness of slavery and he wouldn't change his mind until he was convinced that the Bible was not the book of God. But gradually, minds were changed. In 1956, almost 100 years after the war, one man said this:

"During the first 60 years of my life, I never questioned but that Peter's confession that "God is no respecter of persons" referred exclusively to the difference among white Christians. Neither did I question that segregation was Christian and that it referred to the separation of white and Negro people. Three years ago, these views were completely transformed. I became convinced that God makes no distinctions among people...I exchanged the former view which I had absorbed from my environment, for the latter view which I learned from the NT. I came to understand the meaning of Paul's plea,"Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Gomes, *The Good Book*)

So the message for us: Going back to that word "inspired" and thinking of it as God's breath, our hope comes from knowing that God has breathed all of creation and each of us, into existence. We're surrounded by God-breathed gifts: creation, history, our relationships and the Bible. And all the gifts are given with an eye to each of us coming face to face with that God who loves us. That's our ever present hope and our everlasting destiny. AMEN.